AMERICA'S "MAGNA CHARTA"

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SIGNING THE DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE — PAINTING BY TRUMBULL

RICHARD HENRY LEE

THERE is an old Latin saying which says: "The voice of the people is the voice of God," and no better evidence exists in proof of this phrase than the American Magna Charta—the Declaration of Independence. In this document are enumerated a few of the truths which struggling humanity has longed ages ago to proclaim; it voiced the sentiments of the common people, and contained the teachings of the patriots of old. While to Americans it expresses principles that are most dear, and by many held to be American in essence, yet every thought announced was ancient in conception, though it never fully found community declaration until at Philadelphia on July 4, 1776. In the study of great events one is impressed with the influence that mere trifles exert on the ultimate outcome of a venture. Our history abounds in instances where trivial matters were the cause of great changes, and innumerable are the occasions where the destiny of an individual career was modified by a circumstance little suspected of possessing any element of force. In the research of data relative to the Declaration of Independence the thought occurred, Was the illness of Mrs. Richard Henry Lee responsible for the present wording of our first national proclamation? Close investigation of this trivial incident leads absolutely to the answer that Thomas Jefferson's association with the committee on Independence was brought about because of the illness of Mrs. Lee, and sufficient circumstantial evidence is at hand to substantiate this statement.

Richard Henry Lee was a distinguished debater from Virginia, and when he was delegated to represent the "Old Colony" in the continental congress he was instructed by the legislature of Virginia to introduce a resolution into the continental body declaring complete renunciation of colonial allegiance to mother England, and if there is a man in all history who fearlessly championed the principle of individual rights and personal liberty, it was Richard Henry Lee.

The records show that his eloquence was matchless, and his logic the very soundest when he, on June 7, introduced the following resolution, declaring: "That these united colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown; and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."

This rebellious resolution brought consternation to many of the delegates, and only a man of great mental strength could have won so glorious a victory, since the delegates were at this time unprepared to accept such a declaration, and few indeed entertained seriously the thought of proclaiming thus boldly for freedom. Lee well knew that if his resolution failed to receive support he would be uncomfortable in the congress, and might expect death at the hands of England for his words of rebellion and action as a traitor.

Americans underestimate his power, his wisdom, and his depth of patriotism—for he was indeed the Samuel Adams of the south, and his fiery orations, filled with inspiring climaxes, place him certainly well to the front, when we contemplate the magnitude of colonial separation. Further investigation will show that the assembled delegates, though thoroughly aroused by the eloquence of Lee, felt the necessity of shielding so daring a personage, and immediately after Lee's motion demanding separation, seconded by John Adams of Massachusetts, there appears in the Journal of Congress this "protecting or shielding" entry of "certain resolutions respecting independence being moved and seconded. Resolved, That the consideration of them be deferred * * *." The records then show that the congress directs "that the secretary omit the names of its mover and seconder, from the journals." What better evidence do we require that Lee was in advance of his compatriots and that his attitude was extremely dangerous.

The delegates were not anxious to consider the rebellious resolution, but Mr. Lee was in earnest and had won a few of the giants to his cause, and though the delegates had expressed the hope of considering the step on June 8 at 10 in the morning, nothing was done until June 10, when, after a few warm speeches for and against, the resolution was held to come before the congress July 1. Lee anticipated that a committee might be appointed, and he had prepared an outline of the grievances setting forth the attitude of the colonies—in fact, he knew he would be named the chairman of the committee on declaration, and was busy preparing himself for the colossal task of drafting the Magna Charta of the disturbed colonies, when by "stage mail" he was informed of the sudden and severe illness of his wife. His devotion to her was proverbial, and the great Lee now "stood between love and duty," and, with characteristic southern chivalry, chose the latter. He told the delegates that his mind was expressed, that he had proved loyal to his trust, and begged leave of absence because of the unwelcome news from the valley of the Potomac. His wish was granted, but before he journeyed "back to old Virginia" he was consulted as to his wishes regarding a form of declaration, and his pleasure relative to its execution. He realized that he was the prime figure in the adventure, and expressed the hope that his absence would not induce a denial to Virginia of being represented on the committee which might prepare the instrument of separation. President Hancock sought his confidential thoughts on the personality of the delegate he wished from Virginia, and Lee, who was eminently familiar with the "men and times" of his native colony, cheerfully mentioned the name of Thomas Jefferson. "He is a student of government, a scholar, and splendid penman." Enough had been said, and on the 11th of June, while Mr. Lee was speeding southward to the dear wife, Thomas Jefferson, together with John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston, was appointed a committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. The committee assigned to its chairman the task of the preparation of the document, and he entered into the work with enthusiasm, begotten of the address of the great R. H. Lee.

Hence the illness of Mrs. Lee is responsible for the Declaration of Independence being written by Thomas Jefferson.

It was a happy coincidence that Lee left for home, and Thomas Jefferson soon proved that he was equal to the task, for he gathered together in one matchless document the accumulated grievances of all the colonies, and so effectively wove the argument into a plea that all the world pronounced his a masterpiece of logic. His committee made 6 additions, 10 corrections and 18 eliminations.

Another incident which, though trivial, did much, according to Jefferson, to bring about speedy action regarding the vote on the declaration is worthy of notice. Just back of the hall in which the assembled delegates sat was a large livery stable, and as the day was one of unusual heat the windows were all thrown open, and, there being no screens, the flies and mosquitoes from the barn swarmed into the convention hall. The insects pestered the delegates and caused considerable uneasiness to the members. They alighted on the delegates, and fairly devoured them. The knee breeches which were worn did not protect the legs, which were covered by thin silken stockings, and the stings of the insects caused a most uncomfortable condition, impelling many to pray for a speedy adjournment, but Hancock, Adams, and other enthusiastic supporters, added warmth to the occasion by their fiery eloquence, and prevented an adjournment until the resolutions of Lee were respected and a proclamation of independence declared. In this furnace of heat from both sun and tongue were added the irritating perplexities of troublesome insects, whose activities provoked the members to hastily accept any penalty rather than longer suffer physical and mental annoyance of hungry flies. In fact, the occasion presents the appearance of the old-time fable of "dumb animals and flying insects are man's best friends," for they continually prodded the "sires of old" into doing a duty to mankind, and doing it quickly. Jefferson, in relating the incident, laughed, since the really mere summer's day incident aided in giving us freedom.

Delegates forgot the dignity of the occasion and removed their coats, and this only increased the possibility of attack by the "stinging soldiers of the air." Hence, under the burning words of eloquent men and the piercing rays of the sun and stinging of insects, a decree of liberty was born.

The vote on the declaration was taken at about 2 o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday, and, while it was an intensely warm day for Philadelphia, it certainly was, politically speaking, a cold, clammy day for London.

While the document was not signed on July 4, it had the same moral and executive effect, since the delegates voted for the action and ordered it engrossed on parchment. On August 2 the sheepskin copy was presented, and all the incidents relative to the signing, together with the several comments of members, bear on the sessions of August 2, when all save two members subscribed their names to the pronouncement that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

It was largely due to trivial statements that the delegates were aroused to the spirit of unity, and these apparent remarks led the members to cheerfully subscribe their names to a warrant of death or imprisonment. The oft-quoted humor of Charles Carroll needs to be corrected. In the past we have been told that when Charles Carroll of Maryland stepped up to sign his name to the engrossed document he said: "The British will be looking for all of us, and so they may have no trouble in finding me I will put down my address," and he signed, Charles Carroll of Carrollton. Tradition has it that the audience of delegates laughed heartily, and one gentleman spoke out loudly, "There goes some millions of property."

To indicate that this very wealthy colonist was not at all times at ease financially, the following letter, written by him two years before the declaration was signed, attests. "I must have the money, and speedily, for I am quite out of cash. However, a delay of a few days will make no great difference." This demonstrates the theory that millionaires too often get into close financial quarters.

Mr. Carroll demonstrated his fearless, patriotic impulse prior to signing when he in '75 wrote to a member of parliament these stinging and rebellious words:

"Your thousands of soldiers may come, but they will be masters of the spot only on which they encamp. They will find naught but enemies before and around them. If we are beaten on the plains we will retreat to the mountains and defy them. Our resources will increase with our difficulties. Necessity will force us to exertion, until, tired of combating in vain against a spirit which victory cannot subdue, our enemies will evacuate our soil, and your country retire, a immense loser from the contest. No, sir! We have made up our minds to bide the issue of approaching struggle, and though much blood may be spilled, we have no doubt of our ultimate success." After reading these lines we no longer hesitate to believe that Carroll would eagerly put down his address, "so that they may not hang the wrong man."

The convention contained 26 lawyers, 6 physicians, 9 merchants, 7 farmers, 3 soldiers, 1 printer, 2 statesmen, 1 minister, 1 surveyor and 2 shoemakers, among them four brothers, John and Samuel Adams and Richard Henry and Francis L. Lee.

The statement that Jefferson was the youngest member of the convention is wrong. There were six who were his juniors, and the "boy member" was Edward Rutledge of South Carolina, and he was 26 years old, while the oldest was James Smith of Pennsylvania, who was 66 years old. They did not sign by roll call nor by colonies, as is often published, but rather by volunteer and inclination, John Hancock signing first, Samuel Adams next, Phil Livingston following, Robert Treat Paine fourth, with Thomas Heyward last, or number 56. John Morton was first to die, date being April, 1777 (age 53), while Charles Carroll was last to yield to the scythe of death, on November 14, 1832, age 96.

Even the anxiety of the old gentleman who was to ring the bell in the tower of the state house hurried the passing of the declaration, since he had stationed below his little grandson, who kept impatiently asking the delegates about the declaration. And when the glad moment had arrived the lad cried forth the tidings, "Grandpa, ring the bell! We are free!" Hence, from the voice of a child came the proclamation of liberty.

The bell he rung was not, as is published, cast in England; it was constructed of the metal of a bell made in London, but our liberty bell was molded and cast in Philadelphia by Cass & Stow, in March, 1753. The inscription on it is ancient indeed, and is found in the Bible—Leviticus 25:10.

The truth is always welcome; hence let us correct a number of misconceptions regarding the day. The art of telegraphy was not known to those early sires; news did not speed across the continent in the "twinkle of an eye," or Massachusetts on July 7 would not have prayerfully sought in church and chamber the passage of the "Virginia resolution." They would have known that the deed was already done on the 4th. And if the art of photography had been known to the "boys of '76" a copy of Independence hall on that memorable fourth day of July would show a "flag with thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, with a union of the crosses of Sts. George and Andrew on a blue field," and not the "stars and stripes," as shown on our modern oil productions. And when Washington, on July 9 in New York City, had the declaration read to all the soldiers in arms, the "stars and stripes" was not the banner of the day, since our starry emblem was not devised until nearly a year after the enactment of our "bill of freedom."

Where Jefferson's first or original draft of the declaration may be is not known. He practically admits this in a letter written later in life. He copied the original, with its corrections by the committee, a number of times, and mailed some to several people, one copy going to Richard Henry Lee, others to his home and friends, but the one that was prepared on parchment and signed on August 2, 1776, is safely stowed away in a large steel safe in the vaults of the department of state at Washington.

INDEPENDENCE HALL, PHILADELPHIA

A Rich Error.

"Printers' errors are always funny," said Gen. P. P. Parker of the Arizona G. A. R., "and I'll never forget one that was made over a Memorial day sermon some years ago in Phoenix.

"The Monday morning report of this sermon began:

"'The Rev. Dr. John Blank greased the pulpit on the occasion'—and so on.

"'Graced,' of course, is what was meant."

A Resourceful Mind.

What would happen if a comet should manage to hit this whirling sphere of ours?" asked the imaginative man.

"I don't know," answered Mr. Fanson, "but I'd be in favor of offering it an engagement on our home team."

He Learned Better

"I never spoke a cross word to my wife but once."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Once was enough for mine, thank you."—Cleveland Leader.